DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 145 CG 032 676

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TITLE	Researching the Cybercounseling Process: A Study of the Client and Counselor Experience.
PUB DATE	2003-11-00
NOTE	21p.; In: "Cybercounseling and Cyberlearning: An Encore"; see CG 032 660.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Counseling; *Counseling Techniques; *Counselor Client Relationship; Delivery Systems; *Interactive Video; Outreach Programs; Research Methodology; Technology
IDENTIFIERS	*Online Counseling; Video Teleconferencing

ABSTRACT

The literature on cybercounseling is primarily theoretical and contains numerous recommendations for research. This indicates an urgent need for empirical investigations to inform practice and guide policy development in cybercounseling. It has been emphasized that developing guidelines for this treatment modality is an immediate necessity. This document describes a brief counseling interaction that used Internet videoconferencing technology to provide cybercounseling. In this study, cybercounseling refers to counseling over the Internet via videoconferencing. The experience of the counselor and client during the cybercounseling process was analyzed using qualitative methodology. In addition, the chapter describes the skills and competencies used in the practice of cybercounseling. Suggestions to guide practice and implications associated with cybercounseling are discussed. (Contains 24 references.) (Author/ADT)

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Researching the Cybercounseling Process: A Study of the Client and Counselor Experience

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Chapter Sixteen

Researching the Cybercounseling Process: A Study of the Client and Counselor Experience

Jacqueline Lewis, Diane Coursol, and Kay Herting Wahl

Few professions remain untouched by recent technological advancements (U. S. Department of Labor [DOL], 2000) and this cybernetic trend is also apparent in the mental health profession (Bowlsbey, 2000). There are increasing attempts to harness the potential of technology to provide mental health services online (Boynton, 2001; Collie, Mitchell, & Murphy, 2000; Haas, 2000; Jerome, DeLeon, James, Folen, Earles & Gedney, 2000; Sampson, Kolodinsky & Greeno, 1997). From Australia, Canada and Czechoslovakia to the United States, cybercounseling is an increasing presence on the Internet. The American Counseling Association (ACA) and the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC) predict that with society's increased comfort with technology, cybercounseling will continue to expand (Bloom, 1998). With more counselors attempting to offer services over the Internet (Boynton, 2001; Jerome, et al., 2000; Sampson, et al., 1997), it is imperative that counselors understand what is involved in the use of this emerging modality. However, there is little research to guide the implementation of training efforts or to identify appropriate cybercounseling strategies (Bloom, 1998; Guterman & Kirk, 1999; Stamm, 1998; Sussman, 2000). In addition, there is a need to investigate the cybercounseling experience from the perspective of clients and counselors.

The literature on cybercounseling is primarily theoretical and contains numerous recommendations for research in this area (Bloom, 1998; Lewis, Coursol, Khan, & Wilson, 2001; Sussman, 2000). This indicates an urgent need for empirical investigations to inform practice and guide policy development in cybercounseling. Jerome, et al. (2000) emphasize that developing guidelines for this treatment modality is an immediate necessity.

This chapter describes a brief counseling interaction that used Internet videoconferencing technology to provide cybercounseling. In this study, cybercounseling refers to counseling over the Internet via videoconferencing. The experience of the counselor and client during the

cybercounseling process was analyzed using qualitative methodology. In addition, the chapter describes the skills and competencies used in the practice of cybercounseling. Suggestions to guide practice and implications associated with cybercounseling are discussed.

Methodology

Participants

The participants included two female graduate students who were enrolled in a counseling graduate program at a public university in the Midwest. Participant selection was based upon the following criteria: Counselor: (a) had completed core classes such as the introductory and advanced counseling skills courses and was in a supervised internship and (b) had some knowledge of technology; Client: (a) had completed the introductory counseling skills class and (b) had some knowledge of technology.

The counselor was a 58-year-old Caucasian woman who was in the second year of a Community Counseling master's degree program. The client was a 29-year-old African American woman who was in the first year of a Community Counseling master's degree program. In a self-report of their level of technological competence, the counselor indicated a beginner level of computer expertise and the client indicated an intermediate level of computer expertise.

Prior to the project, participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and on their role in the project. Both participants agreed to maintain confidentiality about information acquired during the process. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time during the progress of the project. In addition, participants agreed that if they experienced any negative feelings during the project, they would inform the principal investigators and seek assistance with a helping professional of their choice.

Procedure

Prior to the commencement of the study, the participants received training in the use of videoconferencing until they were comfortable using the technology. The training was provided to ensure that technology was not a mediating variable during the cybercounseling process. The participants also completed a demographic sheet that included information about their age, gender, ethnicity and comfort with technology.

The second year graduate student was the counselor in a session similar to a counseling skills training class. The first year graduate student, who was the client, presented with a career problem similar to the problems

presented in a counseling skills class. A private counseling room was established in cyberspace and the counselor and client met for three sessions of brief counseling at pre-arranged times for 45 minutes a week. The cyberroom was established prior to the first counseling session and at the assigned time the client and counselor entered the room using a password.

Analysis

At the end of each counseling session the principal investigators interviewed both the counselor and client to document their experience during the counseling process. The first two authors of this article conducted the interviews. A list of topics with sample questions was developed to avoid the use of leading questions by the interviewers. The interviewers used probes, follow-up questions, feedback, and reinforcement techniques during the interview process as suggested by Patton (2002). Participant responses to the questions were not restricted in any way during the interview process. The interviews continued until each participant indicated that they did not have additional information to offer. Each interview averaged between 60 to 75 minutes in length.

The first author of this article transcribed all of the interviews conducted with the participants. Patton (2002) suggests that such transcription enables the researcher to acquire a better understanding of the experience of the participants. The three authors of the study reviewed the transcripts independently to identify the main themes in the interviews. Once the independent analyses were completed, the findings were compared and the themes identified by all three researchers were retained. To validate these findings, the themes were shared with the participants. Based on the feedback from the participants information was added, deleted or modified as necessary.

Results

To provide a clearer picture of the experience of the participants during the cybercounseling process, the themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed separately for counselor and client.

Counselor Experience

Theme 1: A Two-Dimensional Experience

The counselor described cybercounseling as a "two-dimensional process" where she could see and hear the client, but could not sense or feel her presence. The counselor noted that the counseling experience felt "flat". While it was possible for the counselor to experience the client

through audio and visual cues, she could not sense the energy that is typically generated when in close physical proximity with a client.

The cybercounseling experience was described as having a "surreal" quality that was characterized by a "lack of depth". The counselor reported experiencing an underlying feeling of physical and emotional distance. Even though cybercounseling was in real-time, the counselor's experience in the interaction did not feel real. The counselor's experience is captured in the following comment:

> ...what hit me was its two-dimensions...sort of that realization [etc.]

Theme 2: Accepting Cybercounseling as a Different Experience

When the counselor recognized and accepted that cybercounseling was not going to be like traditional face-to-face counseling, there was greater comfort with the experience. The acceptance of cybercounseling as a different type of experience from face-to-face counseling allowed the counselor to feel more relaxed about the interaction. The more the counselor was involved with the cybercounseling process, the greater was her comfort with the experience. The following quote reflects the counselor's experience.

Well, I certainly felt a lot more comfortable and maybe she felt a little uncomfortable. It worked for me this time and I said, 'Maybe it worked last time but I felt more comfortable with it.' I think part of this is accepting that it is going to be different.

Theme 3: Increased Focus on the Cybercounseling Process

As the cybercounseling sessions progressed, the counselor found that she was more focused on the counseling process. The counselor began to concentrate more on her interactions with the client and the progress of the sessions. The counselor expressed that she was concerned about the client's perceptions of her and whether the client felt understood. The following quotes reflect the counselor's experience.

> I thought, 'No, that's more of a counseling question'...Then, I found myself wondering, 'Hmmm, should I have done that? Should I have said that? More of a counseling question of my skills than it is the technology, the process of cybercounseling.'

> I mean...'OK, there were two issues that came out of the first session and we would work on those andÖ see how things were going.'

Theme 4: Counseling Relationship Lacks Emotional Connection

The counselor described a "good" counseling relationship that was based on the participants' abilities to communicate with each other. The counselor felt that she connected with the client on a cognitive level and that they were able to understand each other. The counselor was able to comprehend the client's issues. However, the counselor also noted that there was no connection on an emotional level with the client; that there was no sense of intimacy between them. The counselor reported that although it was possible to see, hear and even understand the client, the emotional connection between them was missing. The counselor felt that the emotional closeness that comes from physical proximity was absent in this experience. Though the counselor related well to the client on a cognitive level, the emotional connection was not present. The following comment by the counselor illustrates this point.

> Well, I felt that the relationship was good. But, you know, there is that kind of two-dimensional thing. There is a lack of...connectedness...I call it the lack of intimacy because you can't see the whole body and today all I really saw was her head.

Theme 5. Need to Modify Counseling Skills

The counselor reported that while she employed basic counseling skills, they had to be adapted to suit the cybercounseling process. The counselor described modifying her counseling skills because she found they did not have the same effect in cybercounseling as they did in face-to-face counseling. The counselor reported having to modify two skills in particular, silence and listening, during the cybercounseling process. This comment by the counselor illustrates her experience.

> Yes, the skills that one has to learn for counseling face-to-face I've still used, but because it was cybercounseling, they had to maybe be adjusted or I had to be aware of them in a different way.

The need that the counselor felt to modify her counseling skills was particularly true for the skill of silence. The counselor's perception was that silence did not seem to work in the same way as it did in face-to-face counseling. The counselor reported that it was difficult to read the silences that occurred during the cybercounseling process because of the time lag in the audio and video transmissions. The counselor found it difficult to distinguish between client silence and a transmission lag time. Consequently, the counselor felt that there were some instances when she may have

interrupted the client. The counselor noted that she had to learn how to use silence during the cybercounseling process. The counselor described her experience as follows.

> Oh, I knew it was going to be different, but I didn't know how different it was going to be. And, I didn't know how I would feel about the differences. So, I think as I get into this... silence doesn't work the same way in cybercounseling as maybe it does in a one-on-one, in the same way during emotions.

Another skill that the counselor described modifying during the cybercounseling process was listening. Even though cybercounseling was an audio-visual experience the counselor felt that she had to listen very intently. In fact, the counselor noted that her listening skills were heightened during the cybercounseling process. The counselor explained that she had to listen attentively because the non-verbal cues were not always easily visually accessible. This made it difficult for the counselor to become aware of the subtle nuances in communication that facilitate the counseling process. The lack of audio clarity and the time lag that occurred during the transmissions forced the counselor to listen more intently. The following counselor comments illustrate this theme.

> I think I said last time. It really heightens, in that I found that I had to really listen, I had to really focus. There was... some, how do I put this, some time lag with the audio, which I think could be distracting, but you have to pace yourself with that and adjust for that.

Theme 6. Technology Affects the Process

The counselor noted specific aspects of technology that affected the cybercounseling process. One aspect of technology was the time lag that occurred during the audio-video transmissions. The counselor had to learn to manage the delay that was evident between the time when the client spoke and when the counselor heard her. The following statement illustrates this theme.

> There is a lag in this. In the transmission. I felt there were times when I wanted to summarize something and I think that in [an] actual session I wouldn't, I wondered if I was being very intrusive and interfering, I mean...because it was like I wanted to summarize and I thought there was a pause and then she was .....

Another effect of technology was that it was not always easy for the counselor to read the non-verbal cues of the client. Because the video image of the client only included the shoulders upwards, the counselor found it difficult to read the non-verbal behaviors of the client. In addition, the visuals were not very clear and this added to the difficulty of reading the body language of the client. The following quotes explain the counselor's perspective.

> Well, when you are doing cybercounseling you don't always see all the little nonverbal sort of nuances. This time I just accepted that.
>
> Because I think that I became so aware of not being able to [see] the nonverbals not coming across as clearly, and some of them you wouldn't see them at all.

Client Experience

Theme 1: More Comfortable than Face-to-Face Counseling

The client described cybercounseling as a less awkward and less intimidating experience than face-to-face counseling. The client felt that it was less threatening because the counselor was not physically present. In cybercounseling the client did not experience the pressure that is generated by sharing the same physical space with the counselor. The client felt that she was not under pressure to respond in the same way she did when she was in close physical proximity with a counselor. The client expressed having more freedom not to share information when she was in cybercounseling. The following quote illustrates the client's experience.

> From my experience, the uncomfortableness of going into a room where when you are doing the face-to-face counseling, the power aspect of the fact that, I feel that when you walk into the room the counselor definitely has that [power] when its face-to-face. Whereas, with the technology, it didn't seem to be the case for me. And, the comfort level was much more there than it was in face-to-face.

Theme 2: Unexpected Depth of Emotions

The client reported some surprise about the feelings she experienced as part of the cybercounseling process. The client was astonished that she experienced such depth and intensity of emotion while addressing her issues in cyberspace. The client felt that the counselor was able to facilitate a

deeper emotional experience than she expected. The client had not conceived that this could possibly occur in cybercounseling. The surprise of the client at the strong emotions that were experienced during the cybercounseling process is embodied in the following comments.

> Because I've talked to people in class before today. It's like... [it] is somewhat of a moving experience or something compared to...the other times when I've done counseling. And I'm pretty straightforward and honest when I'm in those counseling sessions. I talk to them about whatever is going on at the time, and so I think that that surprises me that we are doing this with this technology and I would really have these feelings.

> I keep reflecting on other sessions I've done and where its been... with people within the room with me, and we are doing counseling, and I can't say that I've felt that before. And I keep trying to think back to... make sure before I make that statement, but I can't say that I felt that before...even with having someone in the room.

Theme 3: Immersed in the Counseling Process

The client described becoming more involved in the counseling process as her issues became the focus of the sessions. The client's perspective of the cybercounseling process was that it gradually came to feel like face-to-face counseling. By the third session, when the novelty of cybercounseling had disappeared, the client began to think of the experience as counseling. In fact, she described "feeling more like a client". The following quote explains the client's perception of the process.

Because initially...it was...the excitement of doing this new stuff and then...the next time it was as it was still new, but I was able to totally get into the counseling session once we got started. But this time we just went into counseling. I went into counseling.

Theme 4: Empowerment

The client described feeling a sense of empowerment during the cybercounseling process that she did not experience during face-to-face counseling. The client reported that the counselor "directed the session but was not in charge of it." The client felt that in cybercounseling she had the power to decide how to respond to the counselor. The technology that allowed the client and counselor to meet in a neutral place like cyberspace gave the client a sense of being in control of the process. Having a sense of

her own space also made the client feel in command of the experience. The following statements illustrate the client's experience.

> Like I said before, it gives me choice. I'm allowed to make some decisions in this, in this session before it even starts. Yeah, I'm empowered to do some things; I'm empowered to set up my things the way I want them and to basically start the session when I'm ready.

> I didn't feel that the counselor was totally in charge and I think it has to do with, and I used this before, coming into her office. I don't come into her office. She actually comes into [mine] because I'm already sitting there and I'm comfortable where I am and then she comes in.

Theme 5: Equal Relationship, Different Connection

The client reported that she had developed an egalitarian relationship with the counselor during the cybercounseling process. The client characterized the client-counselor relationship as an "equal" one in which there was freedom to make choices and where she was in control of the counseling experience. The client felt that the counselor listened to her and understood her perspective. Despite considering the client-counselor relationship as "equal," the client did not feel a strong emotional bond with the counselor. The client explained that she did not feel the kind of connection that one has when the counselor is physically present in the same room. She described the cybercounseling client-counselor relationship as similar to the connection experienced with a person on the telephone. The following quote expresses the relationship that the client had with the counselor.

> The only way I could explain it is just that we have that, the human being, person looking right at you... I don't feel the...I guess it's the connection. I don't feel the connection that you feel when the person is in the room, or it's just when I think about something when I'm online and if I'm, you know, I have, I'm using the web camera and I can talk and e-mail and all of that, its not the same as if that person were right here in front of me talking to me.

Theme 6: Skills that Facilitate

The client experienced the cybercounseling interaction as more than just the use of listening skills. The client noted that the counselor used a

variety of skills to facilitate the cybercounseling process. Some of the skills that the client identified included attending skills, empathy, summarization, reflective listening, and probes. For instance, the client commented that when the counselor reviewed the previous session she felt that the counselor had paid attention. The experience of the client is expressed in the following quote.

> It's more than just listening, its, I mean, the thing is that she's able to see past the specific issue that I'm sharing with her, and I guess go a little forward. She does, she probes to see, ok, is it this, is it just this or is... it something else. Because, we initially started out talking about something totally different than what we ended up talking about.

Theme 7: Listening is Key

The client reported that she used the skill of listening extensively during the cybercounseling process. The client observed that she was more concerned with listening to what the counselor said than to the counselor's non-verbal behaviors. The client described being more absorbed in listening to the counselor as she wanted to hear what was said. By listening closely the client reported that she could hear concern in the counselor's voice. The client indicated that although some of the non-verbal behavior of the counselor was visible on the screen, she did not focus closely on them. The only time the client described attending to non-verbal behavior was when the counselor engaged in some action that attracted attention. The experience of the client is illustrated in the following quote.

> But for some reason, the technology I, I was paying attention to what she was asking me, but it was more like I was, you know, listening with my ears rather than, you know, I didn't do a whole [lot] of just the eye-to-eye contact when she asked questions.

Theme 8: Technology is Secondary to Process

The client explained that she was less aware of the technology as the cybercounseling process progressed. In fact, the client found that once she was immersed in the counseling process she did not attend to the technology. The client stated that she paid limited attention to the technology in the second and third sessions. By the third session the client described technology as "a non-issue" and more as a vehicle by which to reach the counselor.

The client reported that the only time that she noticed the technology was when there was a technical glitch that caught her attention. This point is illustrated in the client's observation after the final session where she notes that she was more focused on the counseling process than on the technology.

> For me, after two sessions, it was totally a non-issue. The second one was still a little new to me, but by the third session we just started the session and I went there to, and I set up the computer just to start my session and that's that was it, until the end, when it was time to close it out.

Discussion

The results of this study have implications for the practice of cybercounseling and for counselors who contemplate engaging in this emerging modality. In this study both the counselor and client observed that cybercounseling was a different type of experience from traditional face-to-face counseling. The counselor described cybercounseling as a two-dimensional process where it was possible to see and hear the client. Meanwhile, the client indicated that cybercounseling was a less threatening experience than face-to-face counseling as she felt that there was less pressure to respond because the counselor was not physically present.

Such findings suggest that counselors are more likely to feel greater comfort with this modality when they accept cybercounseling as a distinct experience from traditional face-to-face counseling. Given the unique features of cybercounseling, counselors cannot expect to transition effortlessly into cybercounseling merely because they are trained in face-to-face counseling. In fact, the counselor in this study indicated a desire for more opportunities to practice cybercounseling before she actually engaged in the process.

A related implication is that counseling techniques may need to be adapted to the unique features of the cybercounseling process. To be effective, counselors will need to adjust their counseling skills, such as silence, summarization, and immediacy to the cybercounseling situation. One of the skills that both the counselor and client in this study emphasized was that of listening. The counselor indicated that the ability to listen carefully was a key element in cybercounseling especially as it was often not easy to read the non-verbals of the client.

Another skill that manifested itself differently in cybercounseling was that of silence. The counselor described silence as not facilitating the

cybercounseling process in the same way as it does in face-to-face counseling. In addition, the counselor had to learn to distinguish between silence on the part of the client and a time lag during transmission.

Given these results, one strategy that can facilitate and enhance the cybercounseling process is the more frequent use of immediacy. As counselors inquire more frequently with clients about the process, this approach will allow them to better assess the progress of the session and the experience of the client. Counselors can also employ the skill of summarization more often to let clients know that they have heard and understood their perspective. This will allow clients to feel that they are active participants in the cybercounseling process.

Obviously, it is to the advantage of counselors to receive some form of training in cybercounseling so that they are comfortable with the process and develop a comprehensive understanding of cybercounseling. Such training would allow counselors to recognize that counseling skills have a different effect when cybercounseling than when being traditional face-to-face counseling. It would also allow them to learn to troubleshoot effectively when there is a technical difficulty.

The results of this study also suggest that clients are likely to react more positively about the cybercounseling process than their counselors, as it allows clients to address their concerns in a less threatening environment. Such perspectives are probably reflective of broader societal attitudes where clients may be more interested in participating in cybercounseling than previously thought (Boynton, 2001). Haas (2000) suggests that because cybercounseling does not contain all the elements that counselors have come to expect in face-to-face counseling such as the presence of non-verbals, it does not mean that cybercounseling cannot be effective. In fact, Powell (1998) suggests that the advantages of uninterrupted care or the longer relationship between the client and counselor that is possible in less costly cybercounseling may outweigh the initial lack of intensity in the client-counselor alliance.

Another interesting finding of this study was that both the client and counselor indicated that though they had a working relationship, they did not experience a strong emotional connection with each other. In cybercounseling, the client and counselor have a relationship that is based upon the participants' abilities to understand the goals and tasks of counseling. Therefore, counselors who engage in cybercounseling may find that though they can see and hear the client, the emotional connection that is an integral part of face-to-face counseling is not apparent. The lack of emotional connection appeared to have interesting ramifications for the counseling process. The client reported a greater sense of control over the

counseling process in that she had the freedom to make choices. While the client acknowledged that the counselor directed the process, she did not perceive the counselor as "in charge" of the session. Thus, the client perceived an equal relationship and was more empowered during the counseling process.

Conversely, the lack of connection in the client-counselor relationship was uncomfortable for the counselor as it made it difficult for her to assess the progress and effectiveness of the counseling process. The counselor also reported that she felt less in control over the counseling process. For counselors trained in face-to-face counseling, this lack of emotional connection is one aspect that will require adjustment. Given the difficulty in establishing an emotional bond with the client during cybercounseling, counselors may need to focus on other aspects of the working alliance such as the goals and tasks of counseling in order to strengthen the existing working connection they have with their clients.

The results of this study have important implications for the manner in which the counseling profession addresses the issue of cybercounseling. It is impossible to tell when technology will arrive at a point where it will capture the elements of face-to-face counseling. However, it is important to note that some of the technological problems that were identified in this study may become less of an issue with Internet2 and its related applications. Offering greater bandwidth, latency, Quality of Service (QoS) protocols (Salpeter, 2002; Van Horn, 1998) and such applications as full-size video (Salpeter, 2002; Van Horn, 2002) and tele-immersion (Ditlea, 2001; Lanier, 2001), these Internet2 initiatives will address many of the challenges associated with cybercounseling. Optimistically, when tele-immersion, with its three dimensional quality (Lanier, 2001), becomes affordable for the general populations, the client and counselor are likely to experience greater authenticity in their interaction. Ditlea (2001) suggests that with tele-immersion, participants may finally have the ability to interact more realistically with each other, giving new meaning in counseling to the concept of "high tech, high touch."

Until then, the counseling profession will need to determine how to incorporate the practice of cybercounseling to best serve clients. One possibility is to consider cybercounseling as a mechanism for follow-up contacts or for contacts between sessions.

Another option is to develop a hybrid counseling experience for clients who lack easy access to mental health services. Instead of an extended interlude between sessions, counselors and clients can alternate between face-to-face and cybercounseling sessions. Such an approach has the

advantage of allowing the client-counselor relationship to develop the emotional bond that is not apparent in cybercounseling.

With the limited investigation into the application of videoconferencing to the cybercounseling process, it is premature to conclude whether it is an appropriate form of counseling. However, as a number of counselors offering services online increases (Bloom, 1998; Hughes, 2000), there is an urgent need for further investigation into the process and outcome of this modality.

Implications for Practice

At the moment, cybercounseling is new and largely uncharted territory and there are practical implications that require serious consideration by counselors. Based on the results of this exploratory investigation, initial recommendations are provided for the set-up and for the process of cybercounseling. It is important to recognize that these suggestions are based on the results of this study and are not all-inclusive.

Cybercounseling Set-Up

The recommendations for the set-up of cybercounseling address technical and non-technical issues. Among the technical issues that require consideration in cybercounseling are those related to the selection of technology software and hardware. A variety of software packages, web cameras, microphones and Internet connection options are available. In videoconferencing, the quality of audio and video reception will depend upon the hardware and software selected. In addition, the mode of Internet connection (cable modem, satellite modem, digital subscriber lines, or dial-up modem) will greatly impact the quality of the sound and picture.

Not surprising, counselors can expect to sometimes experience technological difficulties with audio and video quality. Common audio problems include sound distortions that, at times, make it difficult for the participants to hear each other. Proactively, counselors may want to emphasize that clients should ask them for clarification whenever there is an audio distortion. In addition, clients should be aware that they might have to repeat information when the counselor is unable to hear them.

Another technical concern is the time lag in audio and video transmission. If cybercounseling is a new experience for participants, the counselor and client may need to adjust to the digital quality of the audio and the time lag. Depending upon the hardware, the audio can be limited in its ability to capture subtle voice inflections of the participants. In addition, the participants have to learn to distinguish between a transmission lag and a moment of silence during the cybercounseling interaction. Such conditions

may not always make it possible to identify the emotions that the client experiences during the cybercounseling process.

While the video allows the participants to see each other, it provides a restricted picture that often extends from the shoulders upward. Therefore, it is difficult for participants to read non-verbal behaviors that are essential for better communication between the client and counselor. Consequently, the counselor may find it more challenging to get an accurate read of the counseling process and the experience of the client.

Another practical issue is the inability to guarantee security of information in cybercounseling. A common suggestion for addressing this problem is the use of encryption software to protect the information that is transmitted over the Internet (Bowman & Bowman, 1999; Sampson, et al., 1997; Sussman, 2000). While these programs provide some degree of protection, they cannot guarantee complete security. It is important to note that this may be less of an issue with videoconferencing that involves point-to-point communication, than with other forms of cybercounseling. Another suggestion is that when using videoconferencing to conduct cybercounseling, counselors can establish a private cyberroom that can only be accessed with a password.

Given the possible technological challenges, proactive approaches include addressing the procedures for managing these issues on the counselor's website and also in the initial cybercounseling session. The website can describe the technology required for the cybercounseling process including hardware, software, and connection requirements. Suggestions for setting videoconferencing software preferences, ensuring the computer is not in sleep mode, and a description of the cybercounseling process can also be provided.

An important non-technical issue that deserves consideration is the limited research about cybercounseling. Given the limited investigation into cybercounseling, it is critical that counselors are aware of the ethical, legal and practical issues related to its practice. These issues are addressed by various professional bodies including ACA (www.counseling .org) and NBCC (www.nbcc.org) and are available on the Web.

Relatedly, counselors may want to carefully consider the kind of issues that are appropriate for cybercounseling. Again, there is limited research that identifies the problems that are appropriate for cybercounseling interactions. The NBCC (1997) recommends that mental health issues such as relationships that involve violence and psychological conditions that include problems with reality distortions are not appropriate for cybercounseling. Cybercounselors should specify the problems that can be appropriately managed through their Internet practice and those problems

that are not suitable for this modality (Manhal-Baugus, 2001). Prior to the initiation of the cybercounseling sessions, counselors may want to gather pertinent information about their clients. Such information should be collected before the first session through an intake procedure such as an online intake form, a telephone intake or preferably a videoconferencing intake session. The counselor can solicit information such as age, gender, presenting concern, client experience with counseling and the location of the client.

Another issue to consider before counselors begin cybercounseling is whether counselor licensure is required for treating clients in certain states. For instance, California recently passed legislation that mandates that only clinical psychologists and medical practitioners licensed in California can provide cybercounseling to state residents.

Cybercounseling Process

Counselors also need to be aware of several issues about the process of cybercounseling. One aspect that may require modification is the structuring of the cybercounseling experience. In addition to what is typically addressed in face-to-face counseling, structuring of the initial cybercounseling session should address security, confidentiality, informed consent, billing procedures, client contact between sessions, the protocol for managing technical problems, policies for session cancellation and post-counseling contacts. In the final session, counselors can review post-counseling and follow-up contact procedures.

Another challenge of Internet videoconferencing is that the video feature may distract some counselors. The ability to see themselves on the screen can initially divert the attention of neophyte cybercounselors from their clients. To prevent focusing on their image rather than on their client, counselors may want to consider closing their video window to avoid distraction.

While the audiovisual properties of cybercounseling are an advantage, neophyte cybercounselors should note that their behaviors are clearly visible to the client even though they are physically separated. Consequently, counselors may want to avoid engaging in any behavior that is not appropriate for face-to-face counseling.

No discussion of cybercounseling is complete without some reference to the ethical and legal issues that pertain to this process. The ethical and legal issues associated with the practice of cybercounseling are consistently documented in the literature. While an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this article, readers should note that several examinations (Attridge, 2000; Bloom, 1998; Hughes, 2000; Manhal-Baugus, 2001; Sussman, 2000)

of the ethical and legal issues related to cybercounseling are available. Professionals considering counseling on the Internet may want to acquaint themselves with these discussions as the information gleaned from them can inform practice and prevent problems in the future.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the practice of cybercounseling through videoconferencing is a different experience compared to face-to-face counseling. Evidently, cybercounseling entails more than just access to technology and the ability to use it. Rather, cybercounseling involves adapting the technology to the counseling process and the needs of the mental health field so that it serves as a vehicle to expand services for clients.

As this form of cybercounseling is in the initial stages, there is a need for further investigation into this process. Such investigations can provide greater understanding about the process, practice and effectiveness of this modality. As Sampson, et al. (1997) suggest, the counseling profession needs to proactively address the application of cybercounseling to mental health concerns. If and when cybercounseling becomes an acceptable form of counseling, it will not be because counselors have necessarily embraced the concept, but rather because there is an increasing demand for this new and different modality from clients.

The authors thank Audie Willis and Wendy Firven for their assistance with this project.

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